

ISLAM

Mauritania is an Islamic Country. The word “Islam” means “submission” in Arabic, and the title “Moslem” means “one who has submitted.” Islam directs its followers to surrender to the will of God by following the five guiding principles, known as “The Five Pillars of Islam.”

Role

Mauritania has developed cultural patterns through the interaction of Islamic law and indigenous culture that are at the same time African and Islamic. According to J.S. Trimingham, “the two strains of religious inheritance (animist and Moslem) are reconciled for they are woven together like the warp and weft of different textures into a cloth of complicated pattern.”

History

The prophet Mohammed of Mecca founded Islam in Arabia during the 7th century A.D. The religion was soon introduced to North Africa by Arab traders, and spread through the trans-Saharan trade routes to West and Central Africa. The breakup of societies by constant wars and invasions from the 11th century and onward allowed Islam to take hold. Under colonial governments and the involuntary movement to towns or non-traditional areas, people who were isolated from their own family or ethnic groups and the communal life they were accustomed, took Islam as their common denominator. Islam was established in the Sahara and the Sahelian regions, and existed in pockets along the river since the days of the Ghana Empire. It was the *Jihad* or Moslem holy wars during the 19th century that solidified Islam in this country as a unifying force.

Doctrine

The *Koran* is the holy book that contains the religious laws and doctrines of Islam, and believed to be the direct words of God as revealed to Mohammed. The five pillars of Islam are:

- 1. Profession of faith:** There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed his prophet. This is the keystone of Islam. *La Ilaha illallah Mohammadunrrasululallah* is the phrase in Arabic that is repeated many times each day as part of the daily prayer.
- 2. Prayer:** Prayers take place five times a day: at dawn, midday, late afternoon, dusk, and at night. While each town or village has a central mosque where prayers are offered, Moslems will be found observing prayer at home and on the streets. The call to prayer from the mosque can usually be heard throughout the village or town. In urban areas, a loudspeaker is used.
- 3. Fasting during Ramadan:** Occurs during the ninth month of the Moslem year to commemorate the revelation of the Koran to Mohammed in 700 A.D. Moslems abstain from food, water and worldly pleasures from sunrise to sunset for 29/30 days. This is to practice self-discipline and to recall the hunger of the poor. It is also believed that sins committed during the year are forgiven if one keeps fast during this holy month. The sick, young children, pregnant women and those traveling beyond 50 km from home are exempted from fasting. Except for children, those breaking fast are expected to compensate for days missed.
- 4. Almsgiving:** Moslems believe that the charity given on earth to the poor, orphans, twins, aged and infirm will become one's livelihood in heaven. Also, a yearly payment called *zakat* (up to 10% of one's wealth) is given to the local mosque or any poor person(s) in the community.
- 5. Pilgrimage to Mecca:** A Moslem is expected to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, or *haj* at least once during his or her lifetime if it can be afforded. The *haj* can be only made during the 12th month of the Moslem year. When a male pilgrim arrives at Mecca, he shaves his head and exchanges his clothing for two pieces of white cloth symbolizing the equality of all believers before God. Although women do not shave their hair, they

cut a symbolic strand and also wear white clothing. In some countries, upon returning from the *Haj*, man may add “*El Haj*” to his name, and a woman “*Al Hajja*” signifying the completion of the pilgrimage.

Other Islamic customs of which non-Moslems should be aware include the restrictions against drinking alcohol or eating pork. It is also impolite to interrupt a Moslem’s prayer, especially by walking in front of him. Friday is a special prayer day when Moslem men put on their best caftans and boubous and gather in the mosque for the afternoon prayer. This is the day when beggars congregate near the mosque to receive alms. Women generally pray in the privacy of their homes since only those past childbearing age are allowed to pray in the mosque.

The Moslem Weekend

In Mauritania, Government Offices, Post Offices are closed Thursday afternoons and Fridays. However banks, several Embassies and some travel agencies work all day Thursday, but are closed Fridays and Saturdays. Sunday is a normal workday.

Moslem Holiday and Special Observances

The Islamic year is marked by many religious and traditional holidays. Some involve prayer and fasting while others take on additional festive aspects. Some are more cultural than religious in origin. Some are obligatory for the believer while others are not.

Not all Moslem holidays are celebrated everywhere. A few, Ramadan, *‘Id al-Fitr*, and *Ld al-Adha* (Tabaski) are celebrated widely in the Moslem world while others are important in certain areas or are significant only to particular groups of Moslems. Similarly, the forms of celebration of the same holiday may differ from country to country. In addition, many Islamic countries have their own additional holidays.

Lunar Calendar

Islamic holidays occur in the Moslem lunar calendar of 354 days, or twelve twenty-eight day months. These months, *Muharram*, *Safar*, *Rabi’I*, *Rabi’II*, *Jumadi I*, *Jumadi II*, *Rajab*, *Sha’ban*, *Ramadan*, *Shawwal*, *Dhu al-Qidah*, and *Dhu al-Hijjah*, each begin with the new moon. Because the West uses the Gregorian calendar that is based on the 365-day rotation of the earth around the sun, the Gregorian and Moslem calendars do not conform. Therefore an annual check is necessary to determine the Gregorian date that corresponds to a particular Islamic festival. A general rule is that the date will advance 11 days from one year to the next.

A particular date in both calendars will coincide once in 32 years (i.e. January 1 – 1 Muharram). Because the Gregorian calendar is accepted internationally, people in most Moslem countries operate in both calendar systems and the international calendar is used in non-Moslem matters.

Moslem holidays are dated in relation to phase of the moon. Throughout the Moslem world, there are astronomers and mathematicians who calculate precisely when these can be anticipated. Nonetheless, in many areas, the date is not confirmed until the actual sighting. Islam is a worldwide religion, and therefore because of differences in geography and sighting, holidays may begin on different days in various countries. However, the variation is seldom more than one day. Consequently, it is not always possible to anticipate exactly when business and government offices in a particular country will close for a holiday. Throughout the Islamic world, the day is from sundown to sunup, rather than midnight to midnight as in western customs.

Unlike Christmas, Passover, or Chinese New year, which occur at the same time each year, Moslem holidays rotate through the seasons. During a lifetime, a Moslem will observe the Ramadan fast during hot and old seasons and longer and shorter days.

Each Moslem observance has its own significance. They are listed by their Arabic name the same order that they occur in the Moslem lunar calendar. Note, sometimes the Arabic spelling for the name of a holiday may vary or a local name may be used.

Specific Holidays

Muharram 1

Ra's al-Sana, the new year, is the first month, Muharram. Particular religious observances are not called for, but rather it is celebrated much as the new year is celebrated in the West, although without alcohol. The workweek is interrupted in some countries for this holiday.

Muharram 10

'*Ashura*, the tenth, is a religious day during which pious Moslems may fast from dawn to sunset. Although it is not an obligatory day of fast for Moslems, fasting is a recommended ritual and often practiced by individuals. For *Shi'a Muslims*, it is a day of special sorrow that commemorates the assassination of the Prophet's grandson *Hussein*.

Rabi'I 12

Maulid al-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, is celebrated in the 12th day of *Rabi'I*. In some regions, this holiday goes on for many days. It is a time of festivities and the exchanged of gifts, with children receiving candy and toys. Sufis may have torchlight procession at night. Often *Al madih* (passages) eulogizing the Prophet are read aloud. In some places, businesses may be closed for the celebrations. Islamic teaching does not encourage the veneration of saints, the Prophet, or other pious persons, so in some Moslem lands, Saudi Arabia for example, the popular celebration of his birthday is discouraged.

Rajab 27

Llailat al-Isra wa al-Mi'raj, literally meaning "the night of journey and ascent," commemorates Mohammed's night journey from Mecca to *al-Aqsa* mosque in Jerusalem and his ascent to heaven and return the same night. They traditionally celebrate the by praying and reading eulogistic writings. In Mecca, parades may take place. Its observance does not disrupt daily life.

Sha'ban 14

The 14th night of the eighth month, Sha'ban, is widely celebrated by pious Moslems. Sometimes it is called *Lailat al-Bara'a* or night of repentance. In some areas of the Moslem world, it is treated like a new year's celebration. According to tradition, it is the night God approaches earth to call man and to grant forgiveness for his sins. In some countries, India and Malaysia, for example, it is a night when prayers are said for the dead, food is given to the poor, and sweets are eaten.

Ramadan

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Moslem year, is entirely devoted to meditation and spiritual purification through self-discipline. It is a period of abstinence from food, drink, and physical pleasure. The fast is an obligation practiced by Moslems throughout the world, unless they are children, infirm, traveling, or pregnant. Those who cannot complete the fast during the prescribed time frequently make it up the following month. Beginning with the sighting of the new moon, the strictures apply between dawn and dusk for the complete month. Observing the fast, however, does not preclude performing normal daily tasks. In some Islamic countries, businesses slow down for this month and government offices, if they are open, keep short hours. After dusk, the faithful say the evening prayers and gather for a meal. Guests are frequently invited to share in these meals that are often sumptuous. There is also a small meal shortly before the sunrises. In many countries, it is difficult for non-Moslems to obtain food and drink during the hours of fasting; frequently they can best care for their needs in the larger hotels in major cities. It is considered inappropriate for people to openly eat or drink during Ramadan.

Ramadan 27

The next to the last night of the fasting month, *Lailat al-Qadr*, or "night of power and greatness," is an especially holy time. It is said to commemorate the time at which revelation was first given to Mohammed. It is

felt that prayers said during a particular but unspecified hour of this night will be answered, hence many pious Moslems spend the entire evening at prayer.

Shawwal I

'*Id al Fitr*, called the lesser feast, begins immediately after the month-long Ramadan fast. It is perhaps Islam's most joyous festival marking the end of the month of abstinence and the cleansing of the believer. Although the 1st of *Shawwal* is the primary holiday, celebrations often continue for two or three more days. Like the beginning of Ramadan, the exact date is not fixed, although most people know when it should be. In many countries *Id al-Fitr* is not declared until the actual sighting of the new moon. The first morning begins with communal prayer followed by feasting. Families and friends visit each other's homes. It is a time for new clothes and for presents, with sweet pastries a particular favorite. In Indonesia, friends must be greeted and asked forgiveness for the commissions and omissions of sins from the past year and festivities may continue intermittently for several weeks.

Dhu Al-Hijjah 1-10

Moslems, if they are able, are obliged to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. This duty, called the *haj*, should be performed in the last month of the Moslem calendar, *Dhu al-Hijja*. According to the tradition, it commemorates Abraham's offer to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (in Islamic tradition, Ishmael, son of Hagar, was the intended sacrifice, not Isaac, son of Sarah, as held by Jews and Christians). Pilgrims from all over the world converge on Mecca for these ten days performing a number of rituals and participating in communal prayer.

Dhu al-Hijjah 10

All Moslems, whether on the pilgrimage or at home, participate in the feast of sacrifice, "*Id al-Adha*, which marks the end of the *haj* on the 10th of *Dhu al-Hijjah*. The feast of sacrifice or the "greater feast," is observed by the slaughtering of animals and the distribution of the meat. In some places this is done individually, and the meat is shared equally among the family and the poor. Sometimes the slaughtering may take place in a public area and the meat is then distributed. As with the lesser feast to mark the end of Ramadan, people put on new or good clothes, offer a special prayer in the morning, visit each other, give presents, especially to children, and visit cemeteries. The festivities usually last two or three days, during which time businesses and government offices are usually closed.

Prayer

One of the daily and weekly rituals in Islam is prayer. Prayers are said five times daily: before sunrise, before noon, after noon, after sunset, and in the evening. A call to the prayer is delivered from the minaret of the mosque. This is customarily begun by the Arabic phrase *Allahu akbar* or "God is great." The prayers at noon on Friday are the most important of the week. The community, particularly men and boys, gather at the mosque. A sermon in which the community is told of important events usually precedes the prayers. While Friday is a special day, it is not one of relaxation, but one of joining together. Moslem businesses and government offices are usually closed. In some countries, Friday may be a half-day or the lunch hour may be extended to facilitate communal prayers.

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